Why Famous Speeches are Famous

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Abstract: Here is where I write a summary of my paper

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What makes the famous speeches throughout history so famous? Have you ever actually thought about it, probably not? Think about all the speeches you have heard in your lifetime, whether those were class presentations, at a wedding, in politics, after a sports game, or in a movie. As you walked away, did you have the motivation to do something great in life, or change the world, or go stick it to “ the man”. Now here is the real question, did you actually remember any of those, or did you just forget it within a week. My point, there are speeches given everyday about a every different type of topic, but why do we remember certain ones, why do we study those in school, and why did they work so well. In this research paper, I will answer all of those question, and hopefully insight you a little bit.

* John Fitzgerald Kennedy was a great president. He was one of the most popular presidents in US history. Not only did Democrats like him, but Republicans thought great of him as well. JFK had a lot of success while he was in office at the White House. He started the space program, eventually putting a man on the moon, passed laws that went with the Civil Rights movements, protected the United States of America against the communist country of Cuba, as well as passing laws that form the education program in the United States (all facts retrieved from The Miller Center). Before he became the youngest president in US history, he had to be inaugurated first . Jack “JFK” had experts saying he had the best inaugural speech in history. Whether it was Kennedy or his assistant, Ted Sorensen, who did all the research of past president’s speeches, or a mix of both that, should get credit for this famous speech. According to Max Atkinson, rhetoric expert, from BBC wrote an article describing the six secrets of his success.
* “
  + **Contrasts**: ‘Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country’
  + **Three-part lists**: ‘Where the strong are just, and the weak secure and the peace preserved’
  + **Combinations of contrasts and lists:** ‘Not because the communists are doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right’
  + **Alliteration**: ‘Let us go forth to lead the land we love’
  + **Imagery**: ‘The torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans’

In general, the more use of these a speaker makes, the more applause they will get and the more likely it is that they will be recognized as a brilliant orator” (Atkinson, January 2015).

He goes on to talk about presidents after Kennedy, followed how he gave his speech, because it was powerful. Atkinson talks about how former presidents have used some of these characteristics in their speeches, but none of them have hit all six as inspiring as JFK did back in 1961. “The following day, there was nothing on the front pages of two leading US newspapers, The New York Times and the Washington Post to suggest that the countrymen in his audience had been particularly impressed by the speech - neither of them referred to any of the lines above that have become so famous. The fact that so much of the speech is still remembered around the world 50 years later is a measure of Kennedy's success in knowing exactly *what* he wanted to say, *how* best to say it and, perhaps most important of all, to *whom* he should say it” (Atkinson, January 2015). If John F. Kennedy paved the road for great speeches, someone had to find the path that the road would follow, and that person was no other than Honest Abe, the great Abraham Lincoln.

Imagine you are Pennsylvania citizen in November 1863 in the United States. The Civil War will be going on its fourth year of fighting, you have lost neighbors, family members, and loved ones due to the ongoing war. Resources are going scarce, and you are living off the bare minimums. Morals are at an all time low, and there is very little motivation or enthusiasm in anyone you know. Then you get a letter that says to go to Gettysburg for an important speech. You get to Gettysburg, where the smell of rotting flesh can be smelled for miles. Dead bodies are everywhere you look, body parts are sticking up from the ground. It has been 3 months since the Battle of Gettysburg took place -- where 8,000 men died, yet it seems like the battle just ended from the environment around you. When you think it can’t get any worse, it starts pouring rain, getting everyone wet, and exposing even more bodies. Then the President stands up on stage, says 272 words in 3 minutes, and then sits down. Photographers didn’t even have time to set up their cameras. Not only did this speech pay respect to all the fallen soldiers, but give hope to the people of Gettysburg, the people of Union, and minorities everywhere. “Dr. Fears argues that Lincoln’s address did more than memorialize the fallen soldiers at Gettysburg; it accomplished nothing short of transforming the entire meaning of the Civil War. There were no details of the battle mentioned in the speech, no mentioning of soldier’s names, of Gettysburg itself, of the South nor the Union, states rights nor secession. Rather, Lincoln meant the speech to be something far larger, a discourse on the experiment testing whether government can maintain the proposition of equality. At Gettysburg, the Constitution experienced a transformation. The first birth has been tainted by slavery. The men, of both North and South, lying in the graves at Gettysburg had made an atoning sacrifice for this great evil. And the Constitution would be reborn, this time living up to its promises of freedom and equality for all” (McCay, August 2008). McCay wrote that in a piece titles *The 35 Greatest Speeches in History,* putting Abe’s Gettysburg Address at number 1, the greats speech of all time. This speech was a key part of ending the Civil War, giving the people across the country hope, honoring all the people that sacrificed their lives for this country, but ending slavery in the United States. McCay based his list on “**Style:** A great speech must be masterfully constructed. The best orators are masters of both the written and spoken word, and use words to create texts that are beautiful to both hear and read.

**Substance:** A speech may be flowery and charismatically presented, and yet lack any true substance at all. Great oratory must center on a worthy theme; it must appeal to and inspire the audience’s finest values and ideals.

**Impact:** Great oratory always seeks to persuade the audience of some fact or idea. The very best speeches change hearts and minds and seem as revelatory several decades or centuries removed as when they were first given”(McCay, August 2008). Lincoln and Kennedy both gave great speeches, but famous, impactful speeches don’t have to come just from presidents of United States of America, they can come from anyone.

Dreams, everyone has them, even animals have them. Most dreams are fictional, and most people don’t follow their dreams. One dream had a major impact on this country, the dream of everyone being treated equally. The dream I am talking about is not like the ones when people go to sleep, but a passion for change and equality. One of the most recognized speeches in history talks about this dream, given by a minister in Washington DC back in 1963. Civil Rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr. gave the ionic “I have a Dream” speech that changed everything across the country, and around the world. Pulling words from the Bible, the Declaration of Independence, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the song “ America (My country, tis of thee)” into his speech, connecting with citizens of every race, origin, territory, state, and gender. ‘King incorporated quotations from patriotic and religious documents to put the struggle of racial inequality "in the context of the great principles of American history,’ said Keith Miller, an associate professor of English at Arizona State University, whose research focuses on the rhetoric and songs of the civil rights movement”(Shaw, August 2013). Grabbing the attention with pieces from other memorable texts, MLK did not only motivate people, but didn’t take long to say what he needed to help move people. “King also used traditional rhetorical devices that enhanced the power of his words -- particularly his use of repetition, which highlighted the points he wanted to resonate with audiences, according to Kennerson-Baty. ‘If you think about it -- the average attention span of any adult person is probably a good 10 to 15 minutes. The speech wasn't much longer than that,”(Shaw, August 2013). As shown with John F. Kennedy, it’s not just what you say, but how you deliver it. "The 'I Have a Dream' speech is iconic as his identity, He put his mind, his soul, this movement where his mouth was. This is beyond rhetoric."(Shaw, August 2013). To be arguably the most historic speech, you have to have more than just powerful words and good presentation but Catherine Carr, from Fast Company, says it was “anchored in a powerful related location”. On the steps of Lincoln Memorial, thousands stood before King, while everyone watched on television across the country, the iconic location made the speech that much better. Carr also says hat made MLK’s speech so big was that “It Uses Vivid And Metaphorical Language, His Call To Action Is Clear And Compelling, and Ends on a Hopeful Note”(Carr, 2015). These three things really made his speech that impactful and memorable. “Vivid imagery, evocative language, and on-point metaphors are mighty tools for making your message clear and memorable. Dr. King traverses intense emotional territory, from the ‘flames of withering injustice’ to those ‘battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality.’ But he closes by filling his listeners’ hearts with a hopeful, aspirational message”(Carr, 2015). “Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘I Have a Dream Speech’ is hands down one of the greatest, if not the greatest, pieces of oratory in American history. King’s charisma, skills in rhetoric, and passion, place him in a league of his own. In this midst of this egregious track record, Dr. King voiced a clear, compelling message of hope, a dream that things would not always be as they were, and that a new day was coming” (McCay, August 2008).

These great speeches share some characteristics, but each are great in their own way. These traits are why we remember these and why others try to mold there off these famous gentlemen. Not only did each change the United States in the given time periods, but will have an impact on generations across the globe for years to come.

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